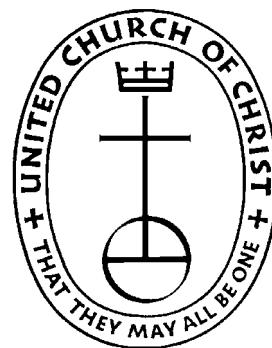


# The Kind of Sharing in Which We Can Take Pride

A Sermon By —  
JERALD M. STINSON  
March 7, 2010



This sermon describes the difference made in people's lives by One Great Hour of Sharing donations. The OGHS money helps Church World Service to respond immediately after natural disasters and to assist some of the world's 42 million refugees, and it also goes to organizations that address the root causes of hunger and poverty.

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,  
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*  
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson  
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First Congregational Church  
(Long Beach, California)

Reading: 2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 10-11; Romans 15:24-26

### *The Kind of Sharing in Which We Can Take Pride*

After the Romans executed Jesus, faith communities arose in his memory. One such community in Jerusalem was led by Simon Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. Biblical scholar Dom Crossan is convinced that community's members shared all their possessions – they were a commune – but they were also landless peasants so it was a kind of shared poverty.

Beyond the borders of ancient Israel, Paul organized several Gentile churches that were slightly more affluent and Paul urged those Christians to help the followers of the Jesus' Way in Jerusalem.

In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul spoke of the generosity of the churches in Macedonia:

*Sisters and brothers, we want to tell you how God's grace has been given to the churches in Macedonia. In the midst of severe trial, their overflowing joy and deep poverty have produced an abundant generosity. I can swear that they gave not only what they could afford but much more, spontaneously, begging us for the favor of sharing in this service to God's holy ones.*

Then Paul urged the Corinthians to give:

*This is only a suggestion – it's my counsel about what is best for you in this matter. A year ago, you were not only the first to act, but you did so willingly. Finish that work, so that your eagerness to begin can be matched by your eagerness to finish, according to your means.*

In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul talked about actually delivering the gifts to Jerusalem:

*I hope to visit you on my way to Spain. I will spend some time with you and hope you will help me on my journey. For now, I must travel to Jerusalem to take a gift of money to the holy ones – Macedonia and Achaia have made a generous contribution for those who are needy among them.*

Sharing with strangers in need. The folks in Corinth, Achaia and Macedonia did not know the people in Jerusalem; they only knew of their struggle to survive. And they

responded to that struggle with profound generosity.

That is exactly what next Sunday's annual One Great Hour of Sharing offering is about. Alongside Protestant, Catholic and interfaith partners, we reach out to the world's wounded.

Today's sermon is not intended to urge you to give more – it's fine if you want to do so, but that's not the point of the sermon. Members of this congregation have already donated over \$6,000 in response to the crisis in Haiti. I would hope this can be a feel-good sermon. I just want to tell you what One Great of Sharing gifts do; what a difference they make in people's lives.

By the end of Second World War, many European cities lay in ruins. So several American Protestant denominations united to create a new agency "to do in partnership what none of us could hope to do as well alone." They called that new agency Church World Service which is now the outreach arm of the National Council of Churches. In 1946 and 1947, through that new agency, American Protestants sent more than eleven million pounds of food, clothing and medical supplies to war-torn Europe.

In 1947, Church World Service, joined by Lutheran World Relief and the National Catholic Welfare Program, created a separate joint community hunger appeal, the Christian Rural Overseas Program, CROP. Today that acronym stands for "Communities Responding to Overcome Poverty." Some of you have been in CROP Walks raising funds to respond to world hunger.

Now with Church World Service and CROP in place, significant amounts of money needed to be raised. So in 1949, church leaders from several denominations organized a joint radio appeal on behalf of their separate campaigns to meet these overseas needs. President Truman began the Saturday evening program with a welcome. Movie stars Gregory Peck and Ida Lupino added their support. Listeners were asked to attend their own local church the next day and make a sacrificial contribution. No exact measure was possible, but it is estimated that more than 75,000 churches participated.

The following year, the title "One Great Hour of Sharing" was given to this effort. From the beginning it was ecumenical. Sometimes the UCC will send some of the money directly to one of our partner church programs overseas, but most of the money is passed on to Church World Service.

I think giving to One Great Hour of Sharing is especially effective because there is very little bureaucracy in the way. The funds flow through already established church and community organizations. For instance, last year Church World Service money

funded a project of the Women's Department of the Namibian Council of Churches. No new structure was needed. Or funds for a program helping Filipino housemaids in Hong Kong went straight to the Hong Kong Christian Council.

You may remember the devastating cyclone that hit Myanmar or Burma. In the days following the storm, the press reported Myanmar's government was blocking international aid efforts. Yet, what you didn't read was that by working with four local partners already in place in that country, Church World Service had no problem helping out. It immediately provided emergency shelter, water and food. The key to that was having local partners.

Let me suggest three general ways in which our gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing make a difference.

First, they allow us to respond immediately to disasters whenever and wherever they occur. The goal of Church World Service is to assure that vulnerable persons and communities, in the aftermath of natural or human-caused disaster, will achieve long-term physical, psychological and spiritual recovery.

For physical recovery, Church World Service delivers material items after a disaster: food, clothing, water, medicine. Those items are stored in warehouses all over the world providing for an immediate response.

In disasters, Church World Service helps local communities of faith stand with the oppressed. It seeks out unmet needs of all survivors, but particularly people who were vulnerable and marginalized before the disaster. That often means helping people who get missed by other relief efforts. I was serving a church in North San Diego County when fire swept through that area. The media attention was on those who lost homes. But we immediately got blankets and health kits from Church World Service for undocumented migrant workers whose plywood and cardboard canyon dwellings were destroyed. Church World Service helped them because religious leaders like me were already on the scene and knew of the workers' needs. So in a disaster, our gifts often help those who were vulnerable and marginalized before the disaster.

In a disaster, One Great Hour of Sharing gifts provide a larger vision of life that includes emotional and spiritual care as well as physical rebuilding. And they assist in the long-term recovery of those in need. Attention has shifted from the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. But more than 640 families are still moving back into their homes thanks to a remarkable partnership between Church World Service and Habitat for Humanity. Church In the first month after the earthquake, they assisted more than 150,000 people, providing water, sanitation, shelter and food. Church World Service

donated 31,000 hygiene kits, 5,400 baby care kits and 4,000 blankets. It provided 60 boxes of medical supplies, each box containing enough medicine and supplies to treat routine illnesses of approximately 1,000 adults or children for approximately two months when placed in a rural clinic.

Church World Service is currently looking especially at needs of those who fled urban areas and moved to rural locations – they are having a harder time getting assistance.

So through our One Great Hour of Sharing offering, we are there to help when a disaster occurs. Secondly, our offerings assist some of the 42 million refugees who have been forcibly uprooted by conflict and persecution worldwide.

Sometimes One Great of Sharing money helps refugees who are waiting to go home. In a camp for displaced people in eastern Chad, refugees can't afford the food they need. Church World Service helped a women's group from the camp begin a camp vegetable garden which has provided more and better food for people in difficult circumstances.

In several Middle Eastern countries, refugees from Iraq are having a difficult time. Helped by Church World Service, the Greek Orthodox church in Syria organized a training program for refugee women; some trained as beauticians have actually found jobs outside the camp in the marketplaces of Damascus.

When I lived in Botswana, a refugee camp in my city helped those fleeing the civil war in what is now Zimbabwe. Often supplies for the camp, like books for the school, arrived in the capital city, 8 hours away. There was no good way to get those items to the camp. Church World Service bought a big truck – a tremendous contribution.

So our gifts help refugees while they are in temporary facilities awaiting the possibility of a safe return home. But our gifts also help those who don't want to go home, who want to make a new start in the United States. Since 1946, Church World Service has helped resettle 450,000 people here in our nation. Last year, Church World Service helped local churches sponsor and resettle over 6,400 refugees.

So, disasters and refugees. The third thing our gifts do is support development programs that address the root causes of hunger and poverty. Through partnerships with local churches and organizations, Church World Service empowers people in the development of their own just and sustainable communities.

Millions of people live on the edge of subsistence, at the will of fragile econo-

mies, struggling to escape the crushing grip of poverty and powerlessness. Most of those people are hungry. They need food, but they also need a way out of that poverty.

Hunger means different things in different places. In Southern Africa, it may mean crop failures, food shortages and famine resulting from prolonged drought. That was what I experienced in Botswana in the 1970's. Families and communities there need food, seeds for replanting and better ways to transport food to isolated village.

In the highlands of Bolivia, malnutrition may come from inadequate protein in the family diet. There training in fish farming might mean new life for children and adults.

Church World Service helps create pockets of innovation, enterprise and collaboration, powered by local ingenuity.

On behalf of our denomination's president, several years ago I met with leaders of our partner churches in Indonesia. In Jakarta, a Church World Service agriculturalist took me to the village of Subang. We went down to a river which flowed through rice fields – the river was the source of Subang's water. But the village was way above the river. To take a couple buckets down to the river and return would take over an hour.

But using appropriate technology, Church World Service provided water pumps operated by water pressure only rather than any kind of fuel. Suddenly water was being pumped up hill into the village itself, and then people bought pipes and could bring the water right to their homes. The pumps and pipes are now made in the village and maintained by village people. A village cooperative runs the program. Life in that village has been totally transformed.

For four years, I lived in Selebi-Phikwe, the second biggest city in the African nation of Botswana. Botshabelo, a desperately poor squatter area outside the city, had more people than the city itself. In a time of drought people flocked to the squatter area hoping to find work to buy food.

I was on the board of the Urban Industrial Mission Programme, a project of the ecumenical Botswana Christian Council, partially funded by Church World Service. I saw first-hand how One Great Hour of Sharing money addressed African poverty.

The Urban Industrial Mission Programme ran a Setswana language literacy program; if you could read and write you had a better chance of getting a job.

We ran a primary school in the squatter area for children who had just come from a rural village or who had stayed home helping care for younger brothers and sis-

ters and were now too old to enter a government school.

We ran a primary and secondary school in the evening for working adults.

We ran a training program for which Church World Service provided equipment you could run without electricity – foot-pedal sewing machines and manual knitting machines. A young mother with two children from my congregation, learned to knit and was loaned one of those knitting machines. She sat in the open market every day making sweaters. She sold the sweaters and gradually paid for the knitting machine. That money meant another machine could be purchased for another student.

Simple but life saving programs responding to real need.

There was carpentry program for young men because that was a skill that could lead to a job in our mining city.

At the center I helped C.T. Nathaniel and his twin brother Obed with their brand-new company, Nathaniel's Concrete Products. The copper mine in Selebi-Phikwe threw out its cinder waste. C.T. and his brother knew how to make cinder blocks which were better than mud bricks for building houses in the squatter area. Church World Service gave us the money for the Nathaniel brothers to buy a truck to haul the cinders and then to deliver the bricks. I helped them learn how to write checks, pay bills and taxes and do other financial things. Their office was under a shade tree, their transport, except for carrying the bricks, was on a bicycle, but they went from being unemployed to owning a company with eight employees of their own.

Our gifts made that possible.

When that first community of Jesus' followers gathered in Jerusalem there must have been occasions of despair. But I imagine hope entered that community when those gifts arrived from the Gentile churches. Hope, yes, because those gifts addressed the poverty that plagued the Jerusalem church, but hope in broader sense because those gifts meant other people, people they didn't even know, cared about them.

It is probably the same today. Despair in Haiti, but hope in the possibilities for rebuilding with the help of One Great of Sharing. Despair in those refugee camps created by the Iraqi war, but hope for those with new careers as beauticians. Despair in situations of poverty and hunger, but hope when our gifts allow people to find their own solutions, solutions that make sense in their own context.

Be proud of what your gifts have done in the past and what they will continue to do. Be proud that we have had and will continue to have an opportunity to turn tears

into smiles, to turn fear into confidence, and to turn despair into hope. Be thankful that we can share. Amen.